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ABSTRACT

This brief paper considers the historical development of comparative education and consequent problems. It is argues that the origin of comparative education was found in the possibility of being both national and supranational in one's orientation to the study of education. This has led to confusion in what is being studied and the concepts used for studying it. One methodological assumption places the nation as the determinant of educational practice, while another regards the nation as the unit through which universal educational values are delivered. The decline of the group or nation as the determiner of education has contributed to the decline of a defining element of education--the placing of young people in a tradition which gives social and moral meaning to life. The confusion about the goals of comparative education, whether it studies the different modes by which education is determined or actively seeks to destroy those modes and teach local traditions and forms instead, could become a strength. For this to happen, educators must draw upon and renew universal sources of knowledge so that people can direct the life of their community. Comparative education should study the determination of an approach to schooling by different groups, and the relationship of those groups to one another. (CG)

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THE METHODOLOGY OF COMPARATIVE EDUCATION AND ITS CLARIFICATION AS A BASIS FOR ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF EDUCATION

by

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THE METHODOLOGY OF COMPARATIVE EDUCATION AND ITS CLARIFICATION AS A BASIS FOR ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF EDUCATION

DOUG WHITE

The study of Comparative Education began last century with a methodological confusion which it has retained throughout its development. A condition for its origin and development was and is the possibility of an at least partially detached approach to the study of education of other countries. The detachment is of intellectuals whose orientation is formed not only by knowledge of their own national culture, but also a wider orientation provided by a supranational intellectual culture. It is of course not possible to 'know' ones own culture without a standpoint outside it, that is without comparative knowledge. That same intellectual development in becoming the basis for schooling in an increasing number of nations becomes a source of the weakening of the national variation. I'm referring here to the modern notion of Comparative Education, not of 'traveller's tales'. A tale told by a traveller of mysterious schooling elsewhere is different from a theoretically-informed account, in that the traveller is likely to see things from the security and certainty of his or her own culture or background. The argument of this paper is that Comparative Education originated in the possibility of being both national and supra-national, that this led to a methodological confusion in the unit of study and the concepts used in making the study, that a similar confusion now is becoming apparent in the theory and practice of education generally, and that the resolution of the confusion in the foundation and methodology of Comparative Education will assist in comparative work which will be directed to the resolution of a parallel confusion in educational theory and practice generally. I end the paper with a brief account of some comparative work which will illustrate the argument.

One of the founders of comparative method, speaking of the method generally rather than its use in Comparative Education, Emile Durkheim was well aware that comparison implied a universal frame of reference.

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> One cannot explain a social fact of any complexity except by following its complete development through all social species. Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts.[1]

Social facts were to be established from outside the reference and consciousness of a particular group. Durkheim, as far as I know, made no predictions that the method of sociology would become turned into a practice which would reduce the variability of societies. He does not seem to have had that kind of insight or vision into the new development of which he was part. Another nineteenth century writer, Karl Marx, saw the abolition of the variety of human society through the onward march of capitalism. In the prophetic words of Marx and Engels in the Manifesto of the Communist Party:

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.[2]

The combination of the elements of the revolutionization of production under the bourgeoisie and the universalism of science and its technological offshoots are now widely recognized as the destroyer of local and national seclusion. Marshall McLuhan, in exaggerating a soundly made point, called it the global village.

There are, as readers of this paper know, many modern comparativists who methodologically obliterate the nation. For example Przeworski and Teune believe that it is the goal of social science to replace proper names with variables. They write:

> Although particular social systems do influence the nature of observed relationships and do yield a gain in prediction, it will be argued here that, if some additional assumptions are accepted, proper names can be replaced by variables in the course of comparative research.[3]

For example, the state of education in India should be related to a factor which is not seen as peculiar to India, but to the level of modernization or some other universally applicable variable.

One stream of writing in Comparative Education has taken up the idea of the universality of educational principles. Another stream has, in practice, not accepted this and presumed a national determination of education. The often quoted words of Michael Sadler provide a thoughtful illustration of this other stream.

> In studying foreign systems of education we should not forget that the things outside the school matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside...A national system of education is a living thing, the outcome of forgotten struggles and difficulties and of battles long ago...The practical value of studying in the right spirit and with scholarly accuracy the working of foreign systems of education is that it will result in our being better fitted to study and understand our own.[4]

That line of thinking goes further with Kandel, and more recently Mallinson. 'Every educational system reflects the character of the society which it is established to serve', Kandel wrote in 1959.[5] Mallinson says that the student of Comparative Education must be primarily 'a cultural historian noting the way of life of a people and seeking knowledge of their aspirations through their philosophical attitudes, their modes of thought, their religious and political awareness'.[6] To all of this it might be said that national character or cultural essence do not seem to have much to do with the greater part of the content of education. Physics is physics, whether taught in the context of the German or the Australian battles of long ago.

Perhaps this is why few theorists of Comparative Education argue for context-determination of education nowadays. The methodological assumption still persists, in a bland form, in the most common books produced within Comparative Education - the monographs of school and society in various nations.

I have been arguing that one methodological assumption in education places the nation as the determinant of educational practice. The other regards the nation as the unit in which educational values, which have a more universal validity, are delivered. Matthew Arnold, who was concerned with what he regarded as universal cultural values judged systems of education by their effectiveness in bringing these to the people, or at least to the middle-class. (in A French Eton, for example). For all the differences between his 'culturalist' (to use a modern term) approach and that of the stony-headed technocrats who used a few years ago to fill so many of the pages of the Comparative Education Review on the relation between education and the gross national product, they are alike in their views of the nation as being the unit of educational variation, not the unit of educational determination.

The problem of the relationship of group life and culture, often but certainly not always expressed in national form, to the more general and abstract bases of the content of much of the curriculum in schools the world over - a problem which is scarcely addressed in the hundreds of articles on methodology written by scholars of Comparative Education - is also a problem in the theory and practice of education generally. It isn't appropriate here to attempt to argue for a particular way of characterizing the qualities of a theory and practice of education. I shall assert them, and hope that they seem right to the intuitions and experience of the reader. Educational theory and practice is concerned with two elements: one is the socialization of young people into a set of group, perhaps national, norms and practices; the other is universalization, the induction of young people into a world of meanings which give justification and legitimation to that society and the person's place in it. Universalization once had a religious and mythical content, more recently an historical and literary content - in both cases one could say that the determination of the direction of education was local or national. That is not so clearly the case any more. Universalization comes through supra-nationally held knowledge, and universally engaged practices; in particular the knowledge of science and related subject matter, and the practices of technology, particularly the electronic media, and the

practice of universal commodity interchange. Group meanings and group life become relatively insignificant. This change is often celebrated, for example by libertarian critics of social reproduction through education; it is also often lamented, for example by those who see control over the direction of everyday life passing into the hands of transnational corporations.

For the purposes of this argument I want to draw attention to only a couple of points. The decline of the group, or nation, as a determiner of education and the directing influence in social life generally has meant that what is often regarded as a defining element of education - the placing of young people in a tradition which gives social and moral meaning to life - is in decline. Even the reformation of that society in terms of employment for young people becomes difficult. The disjunction between an actual social life, and its relations with the rest of the world, is a major cause of social and educational disorder.

For Comparative Education, it follows:

1. The nation as the unit of study is less significant. The attempt to add to Comparative Education the term 'international' is no solution, for international only makes sense when there are relatively equal and independent units to form the relations of equality implied by the term.

2. The idea of the nation as the unit of variation, implied within one stream of comparative work in education, has become a means by which national education has been destroyed (a minor crime, except morally, since no one would say that comparative educationists have been very effective; although no doubt studies like those of the I.E.A. have done their ideological bit to establish the idea of one goal, many delivery systems).

On the other hand, the long-existing confusion as to what Comparative Education is really doing - whether studying the different modes by which education is determined, or taking its part in working towards the destruction of the determination of education by local traditions and forms - could become a strength. For this to happen we need to formulate a major problem in education, something like this: The task of the educator is to educate the people so that they may be able to establish control and direction of the social life of their community; and to do

so they must draw upon the sources of knowledge, and take steps to renew these sources, which are of a universal kind. To put this in social-relational terms, to enhance the knowledge and reflection upon the form of the relations between members of groups, which may be national; and of the necessary relations between the group and those beyond their boundaries which will enable that group to enhance and develop its own life.[7] The aspect of this problem and project which it is appropriate for Comparative Education to take up is, what studies can be made which will throw light on the relation between national determination and the interchange between the nations?; and, what new light can a comparative approach throw upon the issues?

In the past year or so I have been talking to a group of people who have addressed this problem without benefit of Comparative Education or in fact any formally expressed educational theory. In Alice Springs the original inhabitants, people who call themselves the Mparnte, have established a school, Yipirinya. The name of the school is that of the dreamtime caterpillar which when the world was shaped travelled the country forming the landscape and whose spirit lives on in the people. In the years of white occupation the people have been moved from point to point, the people have learnt English as well as retaining their own language, have been taught Christianity as well as retaining their old beliefs, and come to use the economy of the invaders as well as retained the relationships of distribution of material goods held from ancient times. In recent years the people have returned to Alice Springs from the various missions and government camps in which they were once mustered. Their purpose in establishing the school is clearly stated. They call it a two-way school. 'The children must learn to read and write Aboriginal way, white man's way. We tell the teachers they must teach ways.' The school is therefore bilingual, and while maintaining and reproducing their own culture includes a study of European culture. The comparative study is necessary to the curriculum, as it is to the existence of the people, and allows the changes in the Aboriginal way of life to be understood, to a degree consciously controlled. As one Aboriginal teacher at the school has said 'At Yipirinya the people come to respect each other. We teachers as well as the children, learn from the old people who know our tribal ways best. The old people learn to respect the younger adults, who know European ways best. The children learn from both.'

Yipirinya school has been consistently refused registration by the government of the Northern Territory. Hence it is, strictly, illegal; more to the point, it receives none of the funds which flow to conventional private schools run by the Catholic church and others. Its teachers both white and black are poorly paid, and money is short for facilities. This is not because the N.T. government is opposed to bilingual education; it has many schools which offer bilingual programmes. In terms of Comparative Education the N.T. government believes in a variety of methods of delivering the one set of educational values. At the same time it follows a policy of opposition to a group of people seeking to maintain a form of culture and group life, even though this groups seeks an equal relationship with other groups in Australia.

Much more can be said about Yipirinya, both in itself and as a lesson for educators. My purpose here is to draw attention to an issue for Comparative Education, that those who work in it could greatly assist in the understanding of a problem and the development of processes to its resolution - the problem of the determination of a direction to schooling by groups, and the relationship of those groups to one another.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Emile Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method, New York, The Free Press, 1964, p.139.

2. K. Marx and F. Engels, 'Manifesto of the Community Party', quoted here from Schlomo Awineri (ed.) Karl Marx on Colonialism and Modernization, New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1969, p.36.

3. Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune, The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry, New York, Wiley, 1970, p.10.

4. Michael E. Sadler, 'How Far Can We Learn Anything of Practical Value from the Study of Foreign Systems of Education?', Comparative Education Review, 7, 1963, p.308.

5. I.L. Kandel, 'The Methodology of Comparative Education', International Review of Education, 5, 1959, p.270.

6. Vernon Mallinson, An Introduction to the Study of Comparative Education, London, Heinemann, 1975, p.273.

7. I have tried to work this out briefly in the economic terms of protection and free trade in a short article 'Protection, the Nation and New Forms of Material Production' in Arena 62, pp.1-5.